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TWO LETTERS OF THOMAS NYE,
RELATING TO A JOURNEY FROM
MONTREAL TO CHICAGO, 1837

(1931 REPRINT)

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A Journey from Montreal to Chicago

in 1837

EDITED BY
HUGH McLELLAN

CHAMPLAIN
Privately Printed at the *Moorsfield Press*
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Foreword

THE TITLE may seem misleading to the reader of these Letters because no mention is found in them of *Chicago*, although *Thomas Nye* had undertaken the journey for the express purpose of visiting *Ariel Bowman* at *Dunck-lee's Grove, Illinois*, and of obtaining the hand of his daughter, *Corinna*. The marriage was solemnized in *Chicago* on December 5, 1837, by Rev. *Isaac T. Hinton*. The next day *Thomas Nye* and his bride left *Chicago* in the "stage mail waggon" for *Detroit*, and the trip to *Montreal* was continued by boat to *Cleveland*, and overland along the southern shore of *Lake Erie* to *Buffalo*—with an appropriate visit to *Niagara Falls*—and thence through *Rochester, Sodus, Oswego, Pulaski, Watertown, Gouverneur* and *Ogdensburg*.

His visit to *Chicago* is, however, described in the "diary or journal of dates, expenses & some memorandums & remarks" of the journey, which has fortunately been preserved. The Letters here presented will serve to supplement this Journal.

Thomas Nye was the youngest son of *Elias* and *Elizabeth (Bartlett) Nye*. He was born in *Carver, Plymouth County, Massachusetts*, August 23, 1801; graduated from

the *University of Vermont* in 1822; took up the practice of law in *Montreal, Que.*, after several years of study in the law-office of *John Boston*, a lawyer of some prominence in *Montreal* and *Lower Canada*. *Thomas Nye* died May 15, 1877, in *Montreal*, and was buried in the family vault in *Glenwood Cemetery, Champlain, New York*.

He was a man of considerable learning, a great reader and a close observer. Occasionally, in the few letters which remain, mostly on his legal business, we find such comments and observations as the following:

From *Montreal*, May 12, 1825, to *F. & B. Nye, Odell Town*.

I think I shall be able to make you a good visit after June Term is over; I want to go out very much indeed, tho I can't say but that I am becoming a little more naturalized and begin to feel myself a little more at home. I don't believe there was ever a poor fellow who came out of College so much harassed by fears & expectations who had so little to lose or gain and occupied so little space as I—in fact I was a complete Visionary, or Moon Struck. I knew something of the World thro Books but nothing in reality, every thing was System, and whenever any misdirected force came in contact with my Machinery I was out, I was non plussed, I was sick. I am not entirely free yet, but I almost every day feel some of the old strings snap off, and Lord! I feel as much relieved as *John Bunyan's Christian* did when he felt his Knapsack of Worldly Wisdom droping off, and I breathe free[e]r after it. I think likely if I could have travelled about a little it would have done me a great deal of Good.

From *Montreal*, May 30, 1831, to *Bartlett Nye, La Cole*.

I was at *Quebec* only about 3 days & am very glad

I went. The weather was rather rough & the season appeared much later towards *Quebec*.

I liked the ways & manners of the people I saw much better than those of *Montreal*. I should think them to be much plainer & more civil & polite as far as I saw. I was in many Public Offices & attended the Court of Appeals & think I could perceive that business is very easily transacted at the Public Offices—the Fort and public works I didn't think any very great thing, perhaps the present times in the world influenced my mind—I hate the sight of any thing military, & mine I believe is getting to be the prevailing taste or vice versa.

The Governor is here & to remain some 4 or 5 Weeks I understand. The *Bar* went to make him their respects in a body at his *Levee* & I might have gone, but it seems to me a very empty & miserable ceremony not a word being said, but your name announced, a bow & scrape & make way for another—the very extremity & fag end of Aristocracy.

From *Montreal*, August 30, 1835, to *F. & B. Nye, Lacole.*

I saw Sir *Cha's Edw'd Grey* today (Sunday) he looks a big, robust, gruff appearing, Lump of a John Bull Grazier or Cattle Farmer, with broad Hat & exceeding plain (not too fine) Cloathes; I thought Major *Wingfield* (of 32d) appeared delicate at *toating* along the Street with him. He and some Officers of the 3 Vessels of War now at *Quebec* are gone up to *Niagara*. I should not have said so much about them but there is so much talk about them.

HUGH MCLELLAN

Champlain, N. Y., November 11, 1931.

Two Letters of Thomas Nye

Relating to a Journey from Montreal to Chicago in 1837

I

Pointe Du Chêne or *City of Algonac, Michigan,*
11 Nov^{r} 1837 8 ock P.M.
On Board *Constellation* Stm. B^{t} from *Buffalo.*

D^{r} Brothers,[1]

Just out of *Lake St Clair* entering *St Clair River*, Cabin Passengers all playing Cards in Fine Cabin on Deck, Moonlight & Schooner along side about to leave for *Detroit.* I am going round the *Lakes Huron* & *Michigan* being considered far better than over *Michigan* by Waggons & Stage & bad Roads; pay $30. & found from *Buffalo.* I have not time to say much, was rather wind bound & waited this Boat at *Buffalo* 4 days, have had pretty nice weather except great Blow crossing from *Oswego* to *Toronto*, & Sunday *Buffalo* Docks were flooded by a great blow.

I was highly pleased with *Cleaveland*, high & dry like *Burlington*, saw *George Tuttle* there & Capt^{n} *Warner*, had most pleasing accounts of *Ohio*, *Geo.* & *Alex'r* are doing finely 60 Miles thence at *Manhattan O.* he says *Ohio* is beyond comparison the finest State in the

[1] *Freeman* and *Bartlett Nye.* This letter is addressed: "Mess^{rs} *F.* & *B. Nye* of *Lacole, L. C. Champlain* Post-Office *N. Y.*"

U. S. & from all accounts I should think so certainly, the weather seemed as Warm and fine as August or 1st Septr; *Buffalo* is evidently over-Built on most splendid Scale but may come up to it. I saw *Prentis Law's*[2] Tavern a little way out of City well furnished & he much improved & called smart very comfortably situated with his wife, boy & Father.

At *Detroit* met *J. Hobart*, the Town is quite finely built with Brick & I like it very much. Saw the Legislature then in Session & Young Governor *Mason*,[3] a *Kentuckian* of a *Virginia* family, very young looking apparently 23, black hair & fine strong teeth & middling size, a Lawyer appearing about like *Averill*[4] but much shorter, & smarter eyes, quite prominent or Beetle like, anxiously waiting & cannon firing expecting his reelection, but supposed his majority will be very small if elected.

12th, Sunday Morning approaching *Palmer*, Co. T. *St. Clair County*, looks well, shores low on both sides since *Detroit*, & *St Clair Lake* is shallow with Grass or Weeds growing far into the water in some parts, appears almost as wide as *L. Champlain*, they threw the Lead very frequently. The *Canad'n* side is considered rather before *Michigan* side in soil but does not appear near so well built, the Boat touches no where on the *C.* side, the soil appears excellent both sides.

Saw the Steam Bt "*Thames*" coming in through *Lake*

[2] *Prentiss Law* was proprietor of the *City Hotel, Montreal*, in 1833.
[3] *Stevens T. Mason*, first Governor of *Michigan*, 1836-1840.
[4] Probably *Calvin K. Averill*, an attorney at *Rouses Point, N. Y.*

St Clair from out the *River Thames* from *Chatham* I believe. There are two extra (old) Captains, *Blake* & *Wagstaff* taken on board at *Detroit* engaged by Mr. *Holt* a Proprietor who comes to *Fort Gratiot*, to assist the Voyage round, in case of need. Took 700 b^{shls} Coal at *Cleveland* at 14 c^{ts} & an immensity of Wood at *Algonac*, taking all night.

Just saw 4 Wigwams & Lots of *Indians* & papooses on *Michigan* side, also on *C.* side, but ran closer the *M.* side. They are shooting Ducks w^{h} abound in the River, with Rifles, will soon be at *F't. Gratiot* ab^{t} 85 Miles from *Detroit*, Mr. *Holt* will land there & then the Boat proceeds to *Mackinac*.

Young M^{r} *Livingston* a Clerk in *A. Fur Co.* formerly Clerk at *Gates & Co.*[5] recognized me & calls me by name from knowing *F. & B. Nye* he comes from *N. York*, belongs & is stationed at *Sault Ste. Marie* on *Ste Marie River* coming out of *Lake Superior* into *Huron*, where *Gabriel Franchère* the Agent is & I may see him at *Mackinac*. I know him well, boarded with his Sister, an uncommonly fine man & Successor to *Matthews*, went round to *Oregon*, *Astoria*, by *Cape Horn*.[6]

It is impossible to write legibly, but you may pick out some part & it is a Letter with a date if nothing more.

The weather has been surprisingly fine to me, & they dont seem to think it at all unusual, but thro *Lake Huron* comes the Tug & then *Lake Michigan*, they & *L. Su-*

[5] *Horatio Gates & Co.*, commission merchants in *Montreal.* Issued printed Prices Current from 1823 to 1834.

[6] In 1810, in the "*Tonquin*", while in the employ of *John Jacob Astor*.

perior are all 900 f^t^ deep. I probably will see something Curious at *Mackinac.*

The Boat expected to have met the *Indians* from *Washington* at or above *Detroit* but they have not arrived, I believe, so far.

For curiosity I may send a Letter to *R.* or *Eliza.*[7] I shan't get back by 4^th^ Dec^r^, the Witness days, but make up my mind to it, to make the most of it.

If things continue so fine in appearance I am afraid I shall want to come to the Country to live after pushing at the bar for a year or two longer, but must secure land before. I always fancied *Indiana* & should think that or *Ohio* most desirable, the *Rock River Country* in *Illinois* & *Ouisconsin* stands foremost now in that direction. It does appear that people get their living easily & those who have been East on business are delighted to return & say they would, knowing what they do, abandon their Eastern properties without compensation rather than be prevented from emigrating & these are hale, sensible, right kind of men; they say they were astonished & would often stand amazed at the facilities in farming. All excellent for farmers, but the state of Society & things must long be unpleasant in a New Country. But strange, everything is as convenient so far in travelling as on *Lake Champlain* or *Hudson River*, appears almost as well established on a larger Scale. It is pleasant travelling however I suppose everywhere with money.

They have excellent Horses in *Ohio* & some Young

[7] His sisters, *Ruth Shurtleff Nye* and *Elizabeth Bartlett (Nye) Hoyle.*

men coming up from out of *Cleveland* talking of Hunting & shooting Black & Grey Squirrels reminded me of old times & would please *Bartlett*.

The effort of travelling so far is nothing, but in returning, if I do over land thro. *Michigan* will be tough work & possibly all the way home. I suffered more to *Lachine* & through the infernal Roads from *Cascades* to *Coteau du Lac* & *Long Sault* & seeing the naked stony & Hemlock vicinity of *Cornwall* than I know can be suffered any where on Land. It was enough to make one cut his throat some would say. And now to think of your Black ground & *Sherington Country* & the fine hard wood lands in view affords a wonderful contrast besides the difference in Climate which I think must be considerable.

Now we arrive at *Fort Gratiot* 1 o'ck P. M. no troops here, the Col., *McNeil*, was here short time since, not a soldier, but the American Flag flying looks fine; I have not seen it I think for 20 years. The *Fort* is said to be in Beautiful order & it looks well at a little distance.

Yours,

T. Nye

Black River & *Village* are just before coming to the *Fort*.

In the second Letter, written after his return to *Montreal*, *Thomas Nye* takes up the story of his trip at *Fort Gratiot*. He does not mention his marriage. Nor does he write anything about *Chicago*, which seems surprising until we remember that on March 4, 1837, when it

became a city — and nine months before Mr. *Nye's* visit — *Chicago* had but 4479 inhabitants. It is also curious that no mention is made of the so-called *Papineau Rebellion*, except in the allusion in the following letter to Dr. *Nelson's* "political course".

II

Montreal, 10th Jany. 1838.

Dear Brothers,[8]

I returned on the 28th Decr after just 2 months absence and should have written you, but waited a little to learn the state of things and was told by Mr. *Burroughs* that you were said by Mr. *Hubbell* to be expected in a few days.

I cannot now write you a full account of my journey but was so highly gratified that I shall wish you to go with me and have a thorough tour through all the Western & South-Western States. Had I been something earlier & had a little more money, or as late as it was the more healthy, I should have run down thro. the *Ohio* & *Missisippi Country*. The region is splendid for the poor and the rich farmers to go to & those who have trades probably also, but the comfortably thriving in any traffic, or trades, should remain where they are. The advantageous change to my fancy is South of what in *Ohio* is the ridge or high land cutting off the Lake

[8] *Freeman* and *Bartlett Nye*. This letter is addressed: "Messrs *F.* & *B. Nye Lacole, L. C.* favd by Mr *Geo. Hoyle*."

& Northerly Winds which are very piercing & sweep with terrible power over the prairies in *Indiana* & *Illinois* particularly and wherever there is exposure. I suffered worse a few days than in our Coldest Winter days, but South of their reach I do believe you may bask in the Sun upon a rich Soil. The Soil is always as fine as can be conceived after 30 or 40 miles above *Buffalo* every where South and West & the Climate as to warmth can be the only consideration.

The Voyage after leaving *Fort Gratiot* tossing over *Lake Huron* a little rough for 100 Miles or so, stopping at *Presque Isle*, spending part of a day at *Michillimacinac Fort* & *Post* within 14 miles of *Lake Superior* in sight of *Drummond's Island*, beautiful trout 25 to 30 lbs for 50 cts, water as clear as the air to a great depth, fine Sunny weather, passing through the *Straits*, landing on *Manitou Islands*, passed the Light-Ship stationed in the *Strait* & the beautifully white *Sleeping-Bear Bank* even as a Canal Slope 600 feet high, out of sight of land nearly a day at a time in both *Lakes*, & passing close to the Shore of *Ouisconsin* touching at *Manitouwauk* & down apparently in the Sun's face thro. *Lake Michigan;* all that was delightful.

I have some Stones, & canes cut at some points, & a diary or journal of dates, expenses & some memorandums & remarks. It would be too tedious to write you all; perhaps it is nothing of pecuniary value, but it has been a great treat to me, and I do hope you will not lose another year, if there be anything pleasant in the world and I am convinced there is [a] inconceivably much,

which we are losing hourly while so stationary.

I shall continue to lodge at Mr. *Whinfield's* for a time, till I can locate myself in some snug apartments. Nothing worth remembering of an unpleasant nature occurred to me while gone, & no business has suffered at home as nothing has been done in the Courts in my absence.

The Butter last brought was not sold as you left no price & forbid M^r^ *W.* to sell till you should see to it & although much sought for at a good price, 10 or 11 pence, I believe is now down to 8^d^, but may rise again. I shall use my judgment when to sell, it is in a good state & M^r^ *W* has taken a cask or two of it. The old is become bad, 3 or 4 Casks remaining, *McQueen* could not sell the last & will return it. I shall endeavor to attend to it strictly in future as I understand it I think now as well as any one, & shall trust to no one's opinion entirely but my own & not wait for yours any more.

Yours *T. Nye*

P. S. Should you meet Doct^r^ *Nelson*[9] in *Champlain*, be as useful & polite as you can to him; he was a particular friend of M^r^ *Bowman's*[10] & of *Corinna*, who

[9] Dr. *Wolfred Nelson*, (1792-1863), served as a surgeon in *War of 1812*; a leader of the insurgents in the *Papineau Rebellion*, 1837-38; banished to *Bermuda* by *Lord Durham*, released and lived in *Plattsburgh, N. Y.*, until the general amnesty of 1842, when he returned to *Montreal*. Mayor of *Montreal*, Inspector of Prisons, and head of the *Lower Canada College of Physicians and Surgeons*.

[10] *Ariel Bowman*, a publisher, bookseller and binder of *Montreal*. Moved to *Duncklee's Grove, Ill.*, and in 1840 to *Chicago*, where, with his partner, *Hugh Ross*, he was the earliest book-binder. He died July 3, 1844, aged 58.

A CORRECTION

The possibility that the Dr. *Nelson* mentioned by Mr. *Nye* might have been Dr. *Robert Nelson*, of *Montreal*, led me to place the matter before the *Public Archives of Canada*, and through the courtesy of Mr. *G. J. Audet* I learn that in January, 1838, Dr. *Wolfred Nelson*, having been taken prisoner after the battle of *St. Charles*, was in jail in *Montreal*, while *Robert* was in the *United States*; therefore Mr. *Nye* obviously refers to Dr. *Robert Nelson*. Mr. *Audet* kindly furnished me with a sketch, which is condensed into the following foot-note to replace that on page 14:

[9] Dr. *Robert Nelson*, (1794-1873), a distinguished doctor of medicine and surgeon, member of the *Massachusetts Medical Society*. He was a younger brother of Dr. *Wolfred Nelson*, and was born in *Montreal*. Represented *Montreal-West* in the Legislative Assembly from 1827 to 1830 and again from 1834 to 1838. In 1814, when but 20 years of age, was appointed surgeon to the 7th battalion of incorporated militia, *(Deschambault's Corps)*, and later transferred to a regiment called the *Indian Warriors* and served until the peace. He was one of the chiefs of the *Rebellion of 1837-38*. Fled to the *United States* and proclaimed himself the President of the *Republic of Lower Canada*. Invaded the province (battle of *Odelltown*) but returned to the *States* to escape arrest. Lived in *California* and in *New York City*, where he practised as a consulting surgeon. Contributed to medical journals; translated *Hupeland's* system of medicine. Died on *Staten Island, New York*.

corresponded with Mrs *Nelson* a Very learned & highly accomplished Lady & schollar who has seen the world & Doctr *N.* is perhaps the most accomplished Schollar & intelligent & profitable acquaintance that you will ever see in the course of your lives, a great loss had he not been so unfortunate in his political course. *T. N.*

He knows me pretty well & I think will feel somewhat interested on Mrs *Nelson's* & *Corinna's* account, or would, were he not so situated, they were expecting to be very intimate in *Montreal.*

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